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AUTHOR	Ascher, Carol
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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning methods capitalize on the heterogeneous student bodies of most urban schools. They appear to foster better student achievement than individualistic methods, to increase cross-ethnic friendships, and to improve students' self-esteem and positive attitudes toward other students and the school. Six currently published cooperative learning techniques are: Student Teams-Achievement Divisions, in which students in four-member heterogeneous teams take individual quizzes and receive a team score based on the degree to which each student improved; Teams-Games-Tournament, in which learning teams compete and individual scores contribute to a team score; Teams-Assisted Individualization, in which teams are rewarded on the basis of math units mastered by all team members; Jigsaw I and II, in which individual students become experts on particular sections of a lesson and proceed to teach their teammates; Learning Together, in which students work in small heterogeneous groups to complete a common worksheet; and Group Investigation, in which groups choose subtopics from a class unit and further break their subtopics into individual tasks to prepare a group report to the class. (ETS)

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING IN THE URBAN CLASSROOM

Cooperative learning is an inexpensive, easily adopted method of group learning that appears successful in raising academic achievement and promoting interracial friendships in urban classrooms (Slavin, 1985). It can be used in every public school grade level with a wide range of subjects. Although most classwork is premised on the view that students helping each other is equivalent to cheating, cooperative learning is based on the principles of team sports and rewards the helpfulness and sharing that are natural to most students. Cooperative learning teams consist of mixed groups of four to five students of different races, genders and achievement levels, who discuss problems, quiz, and encourage each other. Teams are evaluated and/or rewarded on the basis of how much each member improves; because each student's achievement increases the success of the total group, team members work toward a common goal. While some methods of cooperative learning also involve intergroup competition and individual work, others are more nearly purely cooperative.

Academic Achievement

Most research, including one meta-analysis of 122 individual studies (Johnson et al., 1981), shows cooperative learning to be more effective than traditional teaching techniques. Black students tend to make particularly large achievement gains through cooperative learning. In one study, black students in a middle-school English class made so much progress with cooperative learning that the traditional achievement gap between them and the white students was eliminated (Slavin and Oikle, 1981). One explanation for such large gains may be that peer groups are more important to blacks than to whites; another, that black students are more cooperative than white students, or at least more predisposed toward cooperation.

Intergroup Relations

Cooperative learning methods capitalize on the heterogeneous student bodies of most urban schools. In fact, cooperative learning is the only well-researched approach for creating contacts in which both black and white students move beyond stereotypes to see and treat each other as equals within the classroom. These equal status contacts and the cross-racial friendships associated with them have been shown to be necessary to successful desegregation (Johnson, et al. 1983). In contrast to tracking and ability groupings, which often deprive students of different races,

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ethnic groups, and abilities of all but the most superficial contact, cooperative learning provides daily chances for intense, teacher-sponsored interpersonal contact among diverse students.

With few exceptions, the research demonstrates that cooperative learning students are more likely to name students of other races as their best or close friends, and to have more cross-race interactions both in and outside the classroom, than are students who learn under traditional methods. In some instances, these increases show up more strongly for whites than blacks--which is not surprising, since white students are generally more reluctant to have cross-race friendships. Although most studies of cooperative learning and intergroup contact are based on short-term experiments in single classrooms, the effects of this technique appear to carry over into friendships formed outside the classroom, as well as into friendships made the following year.

Self-Esteem and Attitudes toward Others

Students working with cooperative learning methods feel better about themselves and others than do students in traditional classes. The well-documented increases in self-esteem, confidence, and self-acceptance are partly a result of being more successful in school work when working in teams, and partly because of feeling liked by others more than traditional-learning students do.

Cooperative learning students also grow in their support for peers' academic performance, which relates directly to the better climate for achievement created in the classroom.

Since prejudice is associated with low self-esteem, it is not surprising that the increase in students' self-esteem is also associated with a decrease in prejudice and a generally greater acceptance of others. Cooperative-learning students tend to feel greater control over their own fate, show more concern for others and more cooperativeness and altruism, and express greater liking for school.

Cooperative Learning Methods

Cooperative learning methods are not something a teacher can master merely by reading about them in articles and books. Rather, they must be tried and adjusted to, so that everyone can get used to a somewhat higher noise level, both teachers and students can feel at ease with new patterns of control and freedom, and students can learn new communications, tutoring, and cooperation skills.

Although laboratory research on cooperation goes back to the 1920s, specific cooperative learning methods only began to be developed in the 1970s. In addition to the informal types of cooperative learning used in many classrooms around the country, there are currently six published cooperative-learning techniques, three of which have been developed and evaluated by the Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools. (Slavin, 1985).

1. Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD). This method is useful in grades 2-12 for any material in which questions with one right answer can be posed. The teacher presents a lesson, after which students study worksheets in 4-member heterogeneous teams. Students then take individual quizzes, and team scores are computed by the degree to which each student improved over his or her own previous record (Slavin, 1983; 1978).

2. Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT). Like STAD, TGT is also useful in grades 2-12 for any material in which questions with one correct answer can be posed. However, TGT replaces quizzes and the improvement scores system with a system of academic games tournaments. Learning teams are divided so that students from each team compete with other students who have similar levels of past performance; individual scores contribute to a team score, (Slavin, 1983; DeVries and Slavin, 1978).

3. Teams-Assisted Individualization (TAI). Useful for mathematics learning in grades 2-8, including in classes with mainstreamed students, TAI combines individualized instruction with 4- or 5-member heterogeneous teams like those used in STAD and TGT. Students take responsibility for all their own checking, management, and routing of work and help one another with problems, leaving the teacher free to instruct small groups. Teams are rewarded on the bases of units mastered by all team members each week. (Slavin, 1983; Slavin, Leavy & Madden, 1984).

4. Jigsaw I and II. Useful for English, social studies, and other subjects in which

a subject can be divided into discrete areas of expertise, these two versions of the same method use the principle of individual students becoming experts on particular sections of a lesson, which they then teach to their teammates. Since any classroom consists of several teams whose work is divided into identical jigsaw pieces, students with the same material to learn can begin by studying together. Students receive either individual grades or team scores based on quizzes (Aronson et al., 1978; Slavin, 1983; 1980).

5. Learning Together. Closest to a pure cooperative model, this approach is useful for all types of problem solving. Students work in small heterogeneous groups to complete a common worksheet, and are praised and rewarded as a group (Johnson and Johnson, 1975).

6. Group Investigation. Useful in most subject areas at both the elementary and secondary levels, students work in small heterogeneous groups using cooperative inquiry, group discussion, and cooperative planning and projects. Choosing subtopics from a unit being studied by the entire class, groups further break their subtopics into individual tasks in order to prepare a group report which is presented to the entire class (Sharan and Sharan, 1976).

Conclusion

Cooperative learning appears to foster better student achievement than individualistic methods, to increase cross-ethnic friendships, and to improve students' self-esteem as well as positive attitudes toward other students and the school. With little or no expense, teachers can either invent their own cooperative learning methods or use some of the existing methods which have proven successful with students of varied ages and a great variety of subjects.

-- Carol Ascher

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ERIC Clearinghouse
on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority
Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia
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